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ABSTRACT

An examination was made of the antecedents to singlehood for black women, based upon questionnaire and interview data from a larger study of 56 black women who graduated from predominantly white colleges in a northeastern city between 1968 and 1970. During the past few decades, researchers have found that a high percentage of educated black women have remarried. In this study, social class background was found to be an important variable in differentiating within the group. Both middle class and lower middle class parents value educational attainment, but vary in the degree to which they stress marriage. The participants in this study who came from middle class homes were expected to integrate careers with family life, while the upwardly mobile women from lower middle class backgrounds had parents who focused on education to the exclusion of other goals. It is concluded that since the process of social mobility necessitates concentrating on adjusting to new environments and styles of interaction, black women from lower middle class families were forced to postpone marriage. Findings suggest that social class is also an important variable in the study of singlehood among other groups. (Author/MK)

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Social Mobility and the Single Black Woman: Perspectives on Marital Options and Limits*

by

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Social Mobility and the Single Black Woman:
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ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, researchers have found that a high percentage of educated black women were single. This paper investigates antecedents to singlehood for black women who attended predominantly white colleges. Social class background is an important variable in differentiating within this group. Middle class and lower middle class parents value educational attainment, but vary in the degree to which they stress marriage. The participants from middle class homes are expected to integrate careers with family life, while the upwardly mobile women from lower middle class backgrounds have parents who focused on educational success to the exclusion of other goals. The process of being socially mobile necessitates concentrating energy on adjusting to new environments and styles of interaction, so consequently it forces many black women from lower middle class backgrounds to postpone marriage. It is important to recognize social class origins, along with current social class position, in deciphering the life patterns of single black women. This finding implies that we should also attend to the importance of social class backgrounds in studying singlehood among other groups.

Social Mobility and the Single Black Woman: Perspectives on Marital Options and Limits

Every year more adults are remaining single and postponing their first marriage (Glick, 1975). Currently, 21.4 percent of the male and 15.4 percent of the female population age 18 and over have never been married (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1977). Most of the work on unmarried individuals either implicitly or explicitly has discussed white middle class urban people (Adams, 1974; Durbin, 1976; Stein, 1976; Stein and Etzkowitz, 1977). This paper explores the situations of unmarried college educated black women. The author recognizes the need for broadening the study of single people to include all races, ethnic groups, and social classes because the antecedents to and the styles of adapting to singlehood can differ from dominant culture people. One can learn from investigations of diverse populations of the presence of additional factors and variables which can further the study of the unmarried. In this case, the focus will be on the effect of social mobility on educated single black women.

Early research in the twentieth century on educated black people has found a high rate of unmarried women as opposed to men (Johnson, 1969). Other studies on the situations of college educated black women, especially those by black researchers, have focused on the problems faced by this population, including the difficulty of finding husbands (Cuthbert, 1942; Noble, 1956). Being black, female, and single in family-oriented, white America in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s has been described as difficult. Yet during the last two decades, an increasing

number of people are opting to remain single, and activities and markets are directed at this growing population resulting in singlehood being accepted as a viable life style. Consequently, one cannot approach examining young, single black women today with the same assumptions of isolation and unhappiness accepted by earlier research.

An investigation of the actual marital trends among the black population reveals higher rates of singlehood among black men and women than among the white population (see Table 1). There are decreases in

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

the percentage of black people in the upper age brackets, which indicates that black women and men are continuing to marry, but many are doing so later in life. Nevertheless, black people are remaining single at a greater rate than whites. In the case of educated black women, especially those who attended predominantly white colleges, there is a myth of the inevitability of singlehood for those who pursue higher education. Yet, it is important not to equate getting an education with remaining single. To the extent that these myths are perpetuated by the lack of information, there is a need for data which will reveal the relationship of levels of educational attainment to marital trends. When we examine background variables for a supposedly homogeneous group of college educated black women, important differences in their social class origins and mobility experiences which are associated with their marital status are revealed.

Table 1

The Percentage of Never Married Black and White Women and Men by Age: March, 1977

	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39	40-44	45-54
Single Women						
Black	60.5	26.3	14.8	13.1	5.9	6.7
White	42.9	14.6	5.9	4.2	4.5	3.9
Single Men						
Black	72.5	38.8	19.6	13.0	10.0	11.2
White	62.3	24.3	11.2	6.7	6.5	5.0

(This data excludes inmates of institutions. It includes 954,000 members of the Armed Forces in 1977 who were living off post or with their families on post but excludes all other members of the Armed Forces.)

Source: U. S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P-20, No. 323, "Marital Status and Living Arrangements: March, 1977." U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1977, Table 1.

Class Differences among Educated Black Women

The data are drawn from a larger study relating social class backgrounds and mobility strategies of black women who graduated from colleges in a northeastern city in the years 1968 to 1970. These women all attended predominantly white colleges, where they would have been in classes with men. They all attended colleges where black students were less than five percent, in a few cases less than two percent of the student body. All of the participants, in their late twenties and early thirties at the time of the study, answered a long questionnaire about their life history, their experiences in different educational institutions, and their lives since college. A selected group of twenty women in different occupations and marital situations were interviewed in person to get additional details on their life choices and strategies for success. The study had a total of fifty-six participants of whom thirty-one were married, five were divorced, and twenty were single; seven of the single women were among the twenty interviewed in person.

The majority of black students in colleges in the 1960s and 1970s were the first in their families to attend college. Along with this population, there were students from established middle class families. The backgrounds of the women in this study are reflective of those different origins. Twenty-five participants were from middle class homes, twenty-five from lower middle class, and six from working class families. Seven of the twenty single women were from middle class families in which at least one parent had completed college. Their parents tended

to work in professional or semi-professional occupations. For example, three of the participants (Deborah Jones, Susan Thomas, and Michelle Clark)* gave as their parents' occupations: physician, elementary school principal, police detective, and teacher. The women from middle class families had parents who had sound economic resources, worked in occupations which were intrinsically rewarding, and had status in both the black and white communities. Because of their positions, these parents had knowledge and insights into middle class institutions which enabled them to help their daughters reproduce their own social class situations.

The thirteen other single women were from lower middle class families.** The majority of these parents had some high school education or a diploma. The parents worked in a variety of occupations, most of which were stable jobs: fathers were postal clerks, skilled craftsmen, semi-skilled manufactory workers; mothers tended to have clerical or sales positions. Katherine Howell's father was a carpenter; Linda Trott's

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*Names are pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

**The lower middle class women were from families often identified as middle class in the black community by field researchers because of their values and support of community institutions, yet they lack the economic resources and prestigious occupations essential for recognition in the wider society. Using traditional socioeconomic indicators, these same families are categorized as working class. The lower middle class label best identifies their status in both the black and white communities The six working class women in this study are included in the lower middle class category. Although they are less financially stable than the lower middle class, these particular families were unique among poor black families because of the sacrifices they made for their daughters' education.

father was a power press operator, while her mother was a secretary; and Tracy Edward's father was a foreman in the postal service and her mother a key punch operator. These parents were stable community members who worked diligently to enable their children to advance. Yet, their occupations were not as lucrative as middle class positions. Furthermore, they had status in the black community, but their jobs were not sufficient to give them importance in the larger society. Most importantly, they lacked information available to those more at ease in middle class institutions, which would influence the type of strategy they developed for their daughters' mobility.

It is generally accepted in this society, as in most industrial societies, that marriage is the ideal state in adulthood. As people become involved in intimate relationships and procreation, they tend to be committed to steady employment in order to care for their loved ones. This situation benefits industrial society. Peter Stein describes various "pushes and pulls" to marriage which encourage people to enter matrimony (Stein, 1976). Yet, there are distinct differences in the degree to which people of varied experiences are expected and encouraged to marry. Parents of the participants from both social classes had high expectations for the educational attainment of their daughters, but middle class and lower middle class parents differed in the importance attached to socializing their daughters for marriage.

During the interviews, the participants were asked what expectations their parents had for them with regard to life style, career, and marriage. The women from lower middle class backgrounds all answered

the question in terms of educational expectations. Karen Johnson said, "They wanted me to go to college. When we passed the local university on the bus, my mother would tell me I was going to go there." Mr. Johnson expected her to save money to attain that goal. Karen began working in the school library while in grammar school and saved all her money rather than spending it on childish things. When asked about marriage, Karen responded that her parents never really talked about marriage. Another woman of lower middle class origins, Linda Trott, recalled, "The only thing strongly emphasized was going to college. Getting married was never emphasized. . . . Later I received more pressure from peers about getting married." This theme is also found in the interviews with participants from lower middle class backgrounds who are currently married. It appears that educational attainment was stressed in their socialization, and this factor most distinguished their lives from their own parents'. A few respondents mentioned that they saw non-college oriented peers marrying directly after high school. It is evident from this that marriage was salient in their communities. However, we know it did not merit special attention from their parents and perhaps as a result of this, marriage was not a central focus of the females' adolescence and early adulthoods.

In contrast to lower middle class participants, those women from middle class backgrounds were expected to marry. When asked the same question about parental expectations, middle class subjects gave responses which indicated that their parents were concerned with both their future work and personal lives. Sabrina Powell, a middle class woman who married

after completing college, remarked that her parents had expectations which included both a career and family life. Her father tended to emphasize preparing oneself for employment and her mother stressed marriage and family life. Her mother often prefaced comments with "when you get married," "when you have children," and so forth. In Sabrina's estimation, her mother expected her to marry and to be an extension of a man. Her parents' commitment to employment for her never questioned that her family would have priority over a career. Deborah Jones another middle class woman, is currently committed to singlehood; nevertheless, she said her parents always assumed that she and her sister would marry and have children. As in the case of Sabrina's mother, Mrs. Jones talked more openly about marriage than her husband, but it was clear that both parents preferred a married life style for their daughters. Education was stressed but Deborah realized that marriage and motherhood were ideal goals.

Participants from both social classes were prepared to overcome racist situations and work hard to attain personal goals, but middle class parents were more able to provide models of how to integrate careers with family life. Most of the middle class mothers had careers, especially in education and social work. Middle class fathers were also strong role models for professional employment. The presence of clear role models for a middle class life style helped the participants plan their future lives, including the integration of careers and family roles. Furthermore, middle class participants received more guidelines and verbal encouragement to fashion a life style around marriage.

Their parents expected them to complete their education, marry, have children, and work, depending upon their family responsibilities. Mary Knight said, "I was raised to be a professional, but this did not preclude marrying and raising a family." In contrast, lower middle class women, who were the first generation to complete college, were primarily concerned with adjusting to the shifting of social classes.

This difference in the socialization to marry reveals an important difference between educated black women from established middle class homes and those from lower middle class families who are raised to be socially mobile, and it can be related to factors which influence the postponement of marriage. The experience of being socially mobile has a tremendous impact on the women involved in the study. There is an enormous amount of energy expended in leaving one world with which one has some familiarity and entering another (Strauss, 1971). If one is black, there is little assistance from dominant cultural institutions in this process. Parents are instrumental in preparing their children for mobility. The participants described how their parents worked hard in finding decent schools, visited schools to advocate for their children, planned after school activities, helped with homework, and provided a great deal of verbal encouragement. Yet, there were limits on the extent to which they could actually prepare their daughters. It was up to the participants themselves to learn about middle class environments and figure out how to succeed in these settings. Learning skills which would enable them to survive in schools and get into a good college were primary goals, while other life achievements were secondary. Once lower

middle class participants had accomplished the goal of completing their education, they could then turn their attention to other activities. Linda Trott worked very hard at mastering her studies and following up career options while in college. At graduation she evaluated her options for the future. She decided to remain in the area and attend graduate school rather than accepting a travel grant because she was finally able to resolve certain life issues. "I needed to work on relationships with people and getting established in a community. Traveling around Africa and Europe would not have permitted that, it would have resulted in more isolation and alienation."

This finding of how socially mobile black women focus on coping with their situations and completing their educations is further substantiated by looking at their own assessments of their priorities while in college. All of the respondents were asked about the life plan preference which came closest to their expectation during their last year in college. Options ranged from "marriage only" to "career only," with most women selecting "marriage, children, and full-time career." This modal response is similar to research which has found that college educated black women expect to integrate careers and family roles (Fichter, 1967; Turner and McCaffrey, 1974). The deviations from this intention of integrating work and family are interesting. Thirty-two percent (ten of the thirty-one) of the women from lower middle class backgrounds indicated that their expectation was "career only," while only 12 percent of the middle class women selected this choice (see Table 2). Many of the lower middle class participants who selected "career only" are

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

currently married, but their answers demonstrate that their major concerns were on education and employment, with little thought during the college years devoted to integrating those aspects with more personal aspects of life.

Nancy Brooks, a lower middle class participant, said she never thought about marriage while in college. "I did not have good models, in terms of my parents, so I pushed those issues aside. I only thought about a career for myself." After graduating and settling into a job, Nancy could think about other aspects of her life and did marry. Yet, there is the possibility that women can actually develop ways of coping which do not give them the opportunities to resolve personal problems.

Katherine Howell, currently single, was from a southern lower middle class family and had a difficult time adjusting to her predominantly white northern elite college. She thought that the black students were unfriendly and consequently gave up thinking about having a social life. She worked diligently at her courses and was friendly with the women in her dormitory. After a couple of years, when she was feeling more positive about herself, Katherine dated men and had closer friends. Many women in this study and in previous research on educated black women, especially those from lower middle class and working class backgrounds, developed a style whereby they sought escape from their problems by immersing themselves in their studies. They tended to get high grades, but many were unhappy and were not actively addressing the sources of

Table 2

Expectation of Life Plan During Senior Year in College by Social Class Background

Life Plan Expectation	Social Class	
	Lower Middle	Middle
Marriage and Children	1	0
Marriage and Children with Periodic Employment	1	4
Marriage, Children, and Full-Time Career	11	13
Marriage and Career	6	4
Career Only	10	3
No Expectation	2	1
Totals	31	25

N = 56

their discontent (Higginbotham, 1974). Nevertheless, the goal of completing college is primary and these women do not let other factors prevent them from attaining it. Such an adaptive style can help the participants complete college, but it will delay other life achievements involving intimate relationships. Because the women are not actively solving the personal problems they encounter, these personal problems persist and intimate relationships are postponed.

At the time of the study, seven of the twenty unmarried participants selected "career only" as their current life plan preference (see Table 3). In the interviews, it appears as if only a few women are

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

actually committed to singlehood. Otherwise, women are continuing their lives with personal goals in mind and if the possibility of marriage occurs, they will consider it. In the words of Susan Thomas, "Career only, but I still would like to be married and have children. I have no marriage prospects and try to accept myself as a single woman."

The single women are coping in different ways with their status. As they approach thirty and are still single, a few are changing careers and thinking about work as a more permanent part of their life. Other women marry when they have established themselves in their careers. Generally, their education has given them a leverage on the world which can be converted into personal freedom. Yet, it is important to recognize the different routes to this position. Middle class women are more likely to be socialized to marry and to think about their lives in terms of

Table 3

Current Life Plan Preference of Unmarried Participants by Social Class Background

Life Plan Preference	Social Class	
	Lower Middle	Middle
Marriage, Children, and Employment (either Periodic Employment or Full-Time Career)	5	2
Marriage and Career	3	1
Career Only	4	3
No Expectation	1	1
Totals	13	7

N = 20

integrating various roles. Even if they choose to remain single or devote themselves to a career, they were encouraged by their parents to integrate personal and work goals.

Summary and Conclusions

This study found differences in the routes to singlehood by established college educated black women from established middle class and lower middle class families. The experience of being socially mobile is a key variable in understanding their marital orientation. First, lower middle class parents proposed and their daughters opted--partly out of necessity--for a mobility channel which precluded early marriage. Then secondly, the experience itself necessitated a heavy commitment which often made it difficult to integrate personal relationships. Middle class participants were more likely to be socialized to marry, an expectation in line with dominant cultural values. Yet, these black women also internalized values which encouraged employment and even [illegible]ered careers. The receipt of encouragement and support facilitated the integration of educational attainment with personal goals.

The parents of lower middle class women in this study emphasized higher education to prepare their daughters for social mobility. This strategy is reflective of the fact that even if married, black women have traditionally been drawn into the labor force to contribute to the support of their families, because racist barriers have made it difficult for black men to fully provide for their families (Bernard, 1966; Scanzoni, 1971). Current discussion about the imbalance in the sex ratio and the instability of black male and female relationships may also necessitate that black

parents favor a mobility channel which insures that their own daughters have the essential skills and knowledge to survive. This strategy was a choice made by parents and later accepted as the game plan by many lower middle class participants, because it maximized their options for improving their life chances. Yet, lower middle class parents were not necessarily expecting their daughters to remain single well into their twenties and thirties. This was an unintended consequence, resulting from the difficulties involved in the actual process of moving from one social class to another, which required that the participants devote great attention to the task and postpone other life pursuits. Furthermore, women in this situation were not strongly encouraged by their parents to marry and found it difficult to think about their education and work along with personal aspects of their lives. Their years of struggling to survive in educational institutions have prepared them for isolation during their adult lives. These women are not necessarily happy with their situations, but they have surely learned how to cope. Progress in the sphere of intimate relationships is often postponed until adjustment to their new social and educational level has been completed.

Many studies of the unmarried have focused on their current social class status, with little attention to participants' backgrounds. Such procedures fail to identify women from lower middle class and working class backgrounds who have been socially mobile by virtue of the fact that they have followed strategies, which often included postponing marriage. As can be seen in this paper, social class backgrounds are important in influencing how women proceed in their lives and adapt to their situations.

Social class origins can also be a factor involved in the choice of a spouse and other friends. More research on single people, which involves examining the context of people's lives and where marital status fits in, can be rewarding in expanding our knowledge of how people continue to make adjustments to the ever changing industrial world around us.

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